PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES
ON THE ORIGIN OF RELIGION

Many theories of religions assume:

Religion as concept motivated by fear, helplessness, feeling of imperfectness etc.
Gods guide and protect
Religion offers afterlife instead of final death ….

some authors:
cognitive aspects –
religion as one guide to understand the world
I.P. Pavlov
William James
S. Freud

Terror management theory/ies
Attribution-theoretical approach
Evolutionary perspectives

Philosophers with psychological argumentation
Xenophanes
Marx
Feuerbach
PHILOSOPHERS WITH
PSYCHOLOGICAL ARGUMENTATION
XENOPHANES
(presocratic philosopher - 6th-5th century BC)
notes anthropomorphic tendencies in conceptions of gods

“Mortals suppose that the gods are born, and have their own dress, voice, and body”

“Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and dark,
Thracians, that theirs are grey-eyed and red-haired”
Suggests that horses, oxen, and lions would have equine, bovine, and leonine gods.
Ludwig Andreas FEUERBACH (1804 – 1874)

1841 *Das Wesen des Christentums*  
(The Essence of Christianity)

God is a projection of man  
- a product of his hopes and desires.
Humans

- could not endure their imperfectness and finiteness, → therefore invention of a perfect and omnipotent being.
- do not want to die → therefore invention of an immortal soul
- could not bear the existing injustice → therefore invention of a heavenly justness
Karl Heinrich MARX (1818 – 1883)

Religion
- originates from alienation
- aids the persistence of alienation

Alienation
When work itself becomes a commodity that is sold and bought
the laborer gives up his capacity to transform the world - this alienates him from his true nature
“Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”

Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right (1843)

Religion as a source of happiness, though illusory and temporary, or at least a source of comfort.

Religion is not as a necessary part of human culture

(Liberation theology: combines Christianity and Marxism)
Religiosity – search for protection

When humans evolved from animals:
many aspects of nature were experienced as
threatening and frightening.
Humans created religion which helped them to survive
in view of a merciless and omnipotent nature.
From then on:
tendency to religion is transmitted phylogeneticaly
Ontogenetically:
Religious reactions are triggered only with “weak” individuals (weak neural system) especially in crises. Individuals with strong neural system overcome religious tendencies and have a rationalistic view of the world. Society should let weak individuals have their religion.

Problem:

*acquired* cultural behavior
cannot be handed down genetically
William JAMES (1842 – 1910)

The varieties of religious experience (1902)

Was not so much interested in the origin of religion in humans, but promoted the investigation of religious experience.

According to James:
Study of religion should study as primary topic religious experience (genius), rather than religious institutions—since institutions are merely the social descendant of genius.
The intense, even pathological varieties of experience (religious or otherwise) should be investigated by psychologists, because they represent the closest thing to a microscope of the mind—that is, they show us in drastically enlarged form the normal processes of things.

James investigated mystical experience, experimented with different substances like nitrous oxide (Lachgas, gaz hilare) (1882), Peyote (1896). Concluded that while the revelations of the mystic hold true, they hold true only for the mystic; for others, they are certainly ideas to be considered, but can hold no claim to truth without personal experience of such.
S. FREUD (1856 – 1939)

two phases of explaining religion
(1) Religion as Obsessive-compulsive neurosis
   (Zwangsneurose) (caused by unconscious conflicts)
   - Zwangshandlungen und Religionsübungen (1907)
   - Totem und Tabu (1912)
(2) Religion is not only Obsessive-compulsive neurosis
    but also regressive wish for protection by an
    omnipotent father
    - Die Zukunft einer Illusion (1927)
    - Neue Folge der Vorlesungen zur Einführung
      in die Psychoanalyse (1932)
1 Religion as *Obsessive-compulsive neurosis*

Freud: fundamental similarity between religious rituals and compulsive actions of people with Obsessive-compulsive neurosis

- Neurotic does not know why he/she performs the compulsive actions - most pious people do not know why they do or question religious ceremonies (Priests or religious experts may know symbolic character of ceremonies)
• Neurotic performs rituals as protective actions because of fear and guilt. Pious people affirm that they are sinners and start their days and extraordinary actions with prayers etc.

• Neurosis originates from imperfect repression and repression of sexual desires. Origin of religion seems to lie also in a repression of desires caused by drives (sexual and aggressive). Therefore, religion connected with guilt because the temptation is returning all the time. It is accompanied by fear of god’s punishment and penances.
In obsessive-compulsive neurosis something unimportant can become the most important. In religion, nitpicking ceremonies tend to become the most important (how exactly to cross oneself).

**Freud’s conclusion:**
Religion is a universal obsessive-compulsive neurosis.
PROBLEMS

religion ≠ religious ritual
(rituals usually only in specific situations, e.g., mass; but not in other religious activities like private praying)

Religious rituals are – in contrast to compulsive actions – regularly, public, begin is often based on objective criteria (e.g., calendar)

Even if religious people perform rituals they do not understand, this is not (necessarily) compulsive (may be learned and automatized, social expectations)

Individual religiosity may be caused by other factors, not only dictated by Superego
2 Religion as regressive wish to be protected by an omnipotent father

Based on the Oedipus complex

• male child wants sexual intercourse with his mother

• father does not allow that - threatens with castration

• son solves conflict by accepting father’s moral rules ( = birth of Superego)
In Oedipal phase:

- Ambivalent feelings of son towards father

- wants father dead because he is a powerful rival in fight for mother’s favor

- therefore, son feels guilty and has fear

Idea of Oedipus conflict transferred to prehistoric times:
In the primal horde, sons hated the father. 
Father claimed all power and all sexual intercourses with the women of the horde. 
At the same time sons admired father for his power and wanted to take his place.

Sons killed father and ate him cannibalistically. 
However, because of their love to him they felt deep guilt and remorse.

Sons defined a surrogate of the killed father: 
**a totem animal**
Sons attempted to undo their bad deed by creating two taboos (moral laws):

1. Killing the totem animal was forbidden.

2. Incest was forbidden.

For observing these taboos, the father assured everything a child can expect from the father: protection, care and being spared (from father’s revenge).
Taboo to kill the totem animal was only canceled to sacrifice the totem animal and to eat it ritualistically.

Later father and totem animal were replaced by god.

For each one god is the father.

Later Freud stressed the protecting and helping aspect of the father or god respective.
Believing in god = regression to an infantile and idealized picture of the father that is constructed as a defence against fears and the dangers of life. These wishes are projected at unknown powers – the gods – that have the features of a almighty and protecting father.
Three functions of gods and religion:

1. Instruction about the origin of the world
   In order to satisfy human’s thirst of knowledge religion teaches that (and how) the world is created by idealized supernatural beings (gods)
   *Freud takes into account also the role of religion as teacher about the world*

2. Comforting and pacifying fears

3. Moral principles
PROBLEMS

Even if one would accept Freud’s ideas about religion, they cannot explain the worship of goddesses.

However: basic ideas are not acceptable.
Freud’s explanation of the origin of religion (and culture, etc) rests on Oedipus conflict. Freud: Oedipus conflict as fundament/base of Psychoanalysis.

However: hypothesis of Oedipus conflict as a universal phenomenon in human development falsified! (cf., Greve & Roos, 1996).

[Even the answers of the boy on which Freud based his theory, have been shown as a product of an inferior methodology: not Freud talked with the boy, but the boy’s father posed suggestive questions (Eschenröder, 1984)]
Incest: In contrast to Freud’s assumptions, higher mammals usually do not have sexual intercourse with potential partners they know from childhood (cf. Hinde, 1999, p 178ff)

Therefore, to avoid incest, the whole Oedipus conflict is unnecessary
CONCLUSION

Freud’s explanation of origin of religion based on the Oedipus conflict is unsustainable

(+:  *Freud takes into account also the role of religion as teacher about the world*)
TERROR-MANAGEMENT THEORY

Malinowski (1884-1942) (Anthropologist)  
*Magic, Science, and Religion* (1948)

S. Solomon, J. Greenberg and T. Pyszczynski (from 1980 on) (social-psychologically oriented)

Human’s awareness of own mortality (mortality-salience) causes intensive terror
This terror can be controlled with the help of two coping mechanisms:

cultural world-views (concepts of the origin of the world, norm and protection from evil by observing norms, ideas of immortality) (not necessarily religious, but often so)

self-esteem that is gained by believing in such a world-view
Problem:
relation between fear of dying and belief in life after
death not really well investigated

  fear of dying ≠ fear of death
(a person may have no fear of death, but may fear the
process of dying)

Grom (2007):
only weak (negative) correlation between intrinsic
religiosity and fear of death and dying
Relation between religiosity and fear of death and dying
seems to be curvilinear (inverted U):
Persons with medium religiosity have highest fear of
death and dying,
low and high religious persons have low fear.
ATTRIBUTION-THEORETICAL APPROACH


Attribution theory: People explain events (especially success and failure) by attributing causes, intentions and motives

(e.g., success in exam – may be attributed to
- good learning
- luck
- benevolent examiner)
Religiosity: tendency to prefer religious attributions to non-religious ones when explaining an event

Religious attributions serve three main motives:

1 Desire to understand the world as something meaningful
   Religion: world is ordered and just
   all events are part of a global plan
2 Desire for control and predictability
   Religion: (some) perceived control by means of prayers, rituals, observing rel. norms
   Conviction that god controls everything and, therefore, everything is correct

3 Desire for good self-concept
   Religion: tells people that god cares about each single one
   provides reinforcement by being active in religious community
Preference for religious attribution over non-religious one dependent on four factors
(Data from questionnaires):

(1) Characteristics of attributing person
   (education, family background, self-concept, type of self-esteem [based on god, based on other people])

(2) Context
   More likely if participation in religious activities, if experience with religious explanations
   (e.g., success of prayers)
(3) Characteristics of event
Religious attribution more likely if attribution of event help to keep up self-concept
(e.g., religious victims of accidents blame themselves more likely than non-religious ones)

(4) Context of event
Location and timing of event affect plausibility of specific explanation
(e.g., if somebody prayed just before a successful medical operation, she will more likely see prayers as means to control bad events)
Attribution-theoretical approach:

- Cognition is taken into account
- Cognition and motivation combined
- Combination of attribution research and psychology of religion seems to be fruitful

- Assumption of simplistic thinking in terms of reward-punishment criticized (success – god’s grace / failure - god’s punishment) (maybe specific for some types of protestantism?)
NEUROTHEOLOGY

„are we hardwired for religion?“

Investigated with (extraordinary) religious experiences:

Newberg, d‘Aquili & Rause (2003): during spiritual meditation reduced activity in area in the prefrontal brain that is connected with spatial orientation and distinction between our body and the outer world (8 Buddhists, 3 Franciscan nuns)
similar: Austin (1998) - Zen-meditation
Persinger (1987, 2002)

Helmet that produces magnetic fields and induces hyperactivity in temporal lobe:

80% of (>1000) subjects: experience of levitation, hearing voices, sensed presence of somebody who is often reported as god or angel.

Critique by psychologists: improper experimental design
improper experimental design: no double-blind design

Pehr Granqvist et al. (2005): Double-blind study

helmet was switched-on randomly in only 50% of trials - neither experimenter nor subject knew when

result: same results (like Persinger) with switched-on and switched-off helmet

Critique on Neurotheology

restricted to (extraordinary) experiences
shows merely that cognitive, emotional and motor brain areas are involved during such experiences (as they are in most kinds of behavior)

No indication that these neural activities developed exclusively for religion or are solely dedicated to religious functions

If humans are „hardwired“ for religion, why religiosity is quite low in many European countries? (Greeley, 2002), why Buddhism, Confucianism?
EVOLUTIONARY APPROACHES to RELIGION

Focus on role of natural selection in the emergence and persistence of religion

recent overview:
also Spilka et al. (2003)
Two main positions:

1. Religion is a direct product of evolution (Behavioral ecology)

2. Religion is a by-product of evolution. Brain and mental mechanisms evolved in order to increase fitness; these mechanisms can also be used for things they were not designed for.
2 Religion is a by-product of evolution

Theoretical positions within this group

► Religion is the by-product of cognitive systems. These systems are the result of evolution, but not exclusive for religion (Evolutionary psychology; e.g., Boyer)

► Religion developed because it serves three basic needs (that are the result of evolution): cognitive, motivational, social (Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger & Gorsuch)
1 Religion as a direct product of evolution
pioneer: Hardy (1976)
recent: Behavioral ecology

(Neurotheology can be interpreted as evolutionary approach, even if it does not stress topic of evolution)

effect of religion on inclusive fitness has to be shown

*Fitness (individual): Chance of an individual to produce offspring*

*Inclusive fitness: Chance of an individual and genetically related individuals to produce offspring*
Concept of inclusive fitness:

*explanation of e.g. altruistic behavior*

Some authors consider religion as a costly signal.

Costly signals: may increase danger for individual but is adaptive under certain circumstances
Example:
Specific species of gazelles high-jump in front of predator („thus advertising their strenght and dexterity“)

Direct fitness cost of this behavior (increased vulnerability, energy spent) is offset if predators turn to other - less strong - prey
Some authors:
Religion as form of costly signalling

Religions involve elaborate rituals that are costly in terms of time and possibly other resources
Religious rituals usually public

Therefore, participating in religious ritual is signalling

Religious groups demanding higher investment in costly rituals tend to remain more cohesive
Sosis & Bressler (2003)
Problems – religion as costly signal

- Religion is interpreted mainly in terms of communication (instead of beliefs)
- Religion is considered as a **direct** adaptation in evolution
Problems – religion as direct product of evolution
If religion considered as a direct adaptation in evolution
- effect of religiosity on fitness has to be measured
- cost of religion have to be defined
  (e.g., religious rituals are costly in time, but provide also nonreligious benefits, e.g., religious ceremony as entertainment, burial of dead prevents scavengers and predators)
- are all kinds of religion equally costly signals?
2 Religion as a by-product evolution

- Religion is the by-product of cognitive systems.
- Religion developed because it serves three basic needs: cognitive, motivational, social
Religion is the by-product of cognitive systems that evolved for other reasons.

for example:

Agent detection: ability to infer the presence of organisms that might do harm (Gould, 1999)

Teleological authorship in the design of individual souls: as objects are seen as being here for some purpose (cloud for raining), human beings are considered as being here for some purpose (Bering, 2006)
Cognitive mechanisms producing illusions of personal immortality (simulation constraint hypothesis) (Bering, 2006)
People cannot imagine being dead; attach, e.g. feelings to dead persons

Theory of Mind

→ Some of these cognitive mechanisms dealt with in more detail in later chapters
Problems with this approach:

- cognitive mechanisms are not yet worked out in detail

- not clear whether a specific mechanism is basic or special case of more general ones (e.g., agent detection may be a special case of causal thinking: search for causes of an observed effect)
• restriction to cognitive mechanisms (without motivational aspects) probably too narrow

• How can we be certain that a cognitive mechanism is genetically anchored, not learned
Religion developed because it serves three basic needs: cognitive, motivational, social (Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger & Gorsuch, 2003)

Cognitive—need for (higher-level) knowledge, information, meaning

People need to make sense out of the world in order to live. Focus on higher-level cognitions and understanding ourselves, our relationship to others, the world. Result is meaning.

Attribution process as central process.
Religious people: explanation of practically all life situations and events with religious attributions especially distressing life situations (death, illness)

question (not only for religious explanations):
  often we are satisfied with very weak explanations („pseudo-explanations“)
Motivational - need for control

Need for control as important basic motivation, e.g., Lefcourt (1973), Baumeister (1991), lack of control connected with depression, helplessness, etc.

Lack if direct control increases belief in supernaturals (Gobbs, 1994), also belief in superstition and magic (Vyse, 1997)

Religious practices increase control belief:
prayer, sacrifice, rituals
different types of control:
direct control, indirect/secondary control

vicarising control (based on identification, Rothenbaum et al, 1982))
as one type of secondary control
idea to participate on the control of others or to profit from the control of others
Gibbs (1994): control in evolutionary framework

According to twin-studies: 1/3 to 1/2 of variance in measures of control beliefs genetically caused (see Spilka et al 2003)
Social - need for relationships

Evolutionary origins of social behavior already assumed by Darwin

Affiliation and attachment have been shown to have biological foundations (also in animals), hormones Oxytocin, Vasopressin, e.g., Carter (1998)

Social cooperation and altruism already in animals (see, e.g., Hinde, 1999, 2002)

Religions strengthen: ingroup bonds, positive social evaluations, welfare
• Positive: Inclusion of motivational mechanisms

• social aspect – it is not clear how the need for relationships should lead to religion